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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [IS](#) [KPAL](#)
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH LIKELY TO REMAIN ON THE
DEFENSIVE ABSENT REGIONAL IMPERATIVE

REF: A. BEIRUT 0060
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 0025

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The recent Gaza conflict again brought to the fore the question of under what regional and domestic circumstances Hizballah would use force against Israel. In addition, the first anniversary of the February 12, 2008 assassination of former Hizballah military official Imad Mugniyeh raises the question if, and how, Hizballah will act on its declared intention to avenge the killing by attacking Israeli interests.

[1](#)2. (C) Evidence suggests and most observers in Lebanon agree that Hizballah's strategy is to not take offensive action against Israel at this time because of concern about the impact of any new conflict on the population in southern Lebanon and its desire to present itself as a non-violent political party for the June 2009 Lebanese elections. However, it continues to affirm its "right" to intervene defensively should Israel take some military action directed against Lebanon.

[1](#)3. (C) The Gaza crisis and the risk that Hizballah could open a "second front" on the Lebanese/Israeli border demonstrated the importance of Lebanese leaders resolving the issue of Hizballah arms and developing a national defense strategy in line with UNSCR 1701. However, it also illustrates the difficulties faced by GOL moderates to challenge the "resistance." Septel will address challenges the conflict exposed for Hizballah. End summary.

GAZA NOT WORTH THE GAMBLE

[1](#)4. (C) During the Gaza crisis, we asked numerous contacts in Lebanon about the prospect that Hizballah would be tempted to take a military action against Israel, such as in 2006 when its forces crossed into Israeli territory and kidnapped two soldiers, prompting Israeli retaliation. Contacts from across the political spectrum told us no, agreeing that Hizballah's support base, Shia in the south, still recovering

from the 2006 war, have no appetite for a second round.

15. (C) Some suggested that the January 8 and 14 rocket attacks, widely suspected to have been the work of the PFLP-GC, may have been an attempt by Hizballah to gauge Lebanese reaction to a possible assault on Israel. If so, the reaction from the Shia street was a resounding no. Middle East Wire journalist Nicolas Noe, who meets with Hizballah regularly, claimed there were divisions within Hizballah on this point, with younger members opposed to an armed confrontation but the leadership in favor. While it touted solidarity with the Palestinians, and sharply criticized Egypt for not opening border crossings with Gaza, Hizballah did not launch an attack against Israel from Lebanon.

MUGNIYEH ASSASSINATION:
WEIGHING OPTIONS CAREFULLY

16. (C) Similarly, Hizballah's actions suggests to us that its threats to avenge the February 12, 2008 assassination of former Hizballah military leader Imad Mugniyeh will not take the form of direct attacks against Israel from Lebanon. This would run the risk of provoking massive Israeli retaliation against Lebanon. In a February 10 meeting with the Ambassador, UNSCOL's Michel Williams, reporting on his February 8-9 trip to Israel, said GOI officials had told him that if Hizballah were to take any action anywhere in the world, Israel planned a severe response in Lebanon. We believe Hizballah wants to avoid attacks that would endanger

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southern Lebanon and is concerned about maintaining a peaceful image for the Lebanese electorate through the June election. This suggests it will instead seek targets elsewhere, and we note that there have been reports of failed retaliatory attacks in central Europe. Hizballah must, however, factor in the possibility of Israeli retaliation.

PRESERVING IRANIAN REGIONAL INFLUENCE

17. (C) Had Hamas appeared to be on the brink of total collapse, however, Hizballah might have acted more aggressively, especially if it faced Iranian pressure to do so. Amal Ghorayeb, a Hizballah expert and political science professor at Lebanese American University, wrote on January 13, "If Hamas is left bleeding to death...either due to the decapitation of its leadership ranks or if its military infrastructure suffers a significant blow, drastically impairing its military performance and leading to its eventual collapse, Hizballah would likely step in." Similarly, Yasser Elwy, an Egyptian diplomat in Lebanon who regularly meets with Hizballah and Hamas officials, concluded that a full Israeli reoccupation of Gaza could prompt Hizballah to take action. In his view, a total collapse of Hamas is a redline for Iran, which ultimately calls the shots for Hizballah and Hamas.

18. (C) A January 9 article in the Arabic daily Asharq Alawsat quoted an unnamed source close to Hizballah as saying, "Hizballah will not engage in a new confrontation with Israel unless Iran decided to wage war in the region." However, Iran also did not appear eager to pursue military action and risk allowing the situation to spill over into a regional conflict. Iran's Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Saeed Jalili, meeting with GOL officials in Lebanon during the Gaza crisis, publicly urged them to use political tools and diplomacy. UNSCOL Chief of Staff Jack Christofides told us January 6 that he believed Iran preferred to save Hizballah's weapons for a "major" rather than "surgical" strike, an opinion echoed by Paul Salem, Director of the Carnegie Institute's Beirut office.

BUT RESERVES RIGHT TO USE "RESISTANCE"

¶9. (C) Throughout the Gaza conflict, Hizballah officials' public statements suggested that while it would not take offensive action against Israel, it reserved the right to use the "resistance" to defend Lebanon against Israeli aggression. Hizballah officials consistently contended that 1) Hizballah does not act on behalf of Syria or Iran and it alone will decide if and when to use its arms; 2) Hizballah does not support Lebanon being dragged into a conflict with Israel (it denied any involvement in or knowledge of the January 8 and 14 rocket attacks against Israel, although it conveyed this denial indirectly through Information Minister Tareq Mitri and support for cabinet statements condemning the attacks); and 3) Hizballah nevertheless would be forced to respond to any escalation of Israeli military actions against Lebanon.

¶10. (C) Hizballah seized the opportunity to use the Gaza conflict to boost the legitimacy of the "resistance" in Lebanon. Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah made several "public" appearances stressing the need for solidarity with Gaza and warning that Hizballah was prepared to respond to any Israeli aggression in a way that would make the 2006 war seem like "a walk in the park." Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad stated that, "We will not be dragged into anything that is not of our choice or anything that we do not decide, but we will not allow ourselves to be targeted in any form whatsoever and under any pretext." He warned that any Israeli attack on Lebanon would be faced by a stronger resistance than it had ever faced or imagined. Hizballah Minister of Labor Mohamad Fneish declared Hizballah was "in full combat readiness" to deal with "Zionist aggression," warning that any "Israeli military adventure" would be

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answered with a "united popular and official front."

¶11. (C) Most observers agree that had Israeli escalated its response to the June 8 and 14 rocket attacks launched from Lebanon and/or killed Lebanese citizens, Hizballah would have had little choice but to respond. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams told us on January 9, the day after rocket attacks launched from Lebanon were answered with Israeli artillery shells, that Hizballah, with whom he meets frequently, had no interest in a second round with Israel. However, his Hizballah contacts were clear about the consequences of further Israeli action against Lebanon. UNSCOL'S Cristofedes concurred that Hizballah was not looking to provoke a conflict, but would respond to Israeli provocation, including increased Israeli overflights, a possibility that both Noe and Oussama Safa, Director of the Lebanon Center for Policy Studies, also acknowledged in mid-January meetings with us.

¶12. (C) Lebanese political analyst Ghassib al Mukhtar, quoted in a January 11 al-Arabiya report, said Hizballah is "fully prepared to respond to Israel if it goes too far in its violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701." Elwy also predicted that if any Lebanese citizens were killed in Israeli retaliatory strikes against rockets launched from Lebanon, Hizballah might feel compelled to act since it continues to justify the possession of arms as a defense against Israel.

NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR
RESISTANCE GROWS AFTER GAZA

¶13. (C) We believe that public and political support from all sides would turn in favor of Hizballah in the event of an Israeli attack against Lebanon. At the January 26 National Dialogue session, President Sleiman praised Hizballah's reaction to the Gaza crisis and reaffirmed the need for the "resistance." Defense Minister Elias Murr also acknowledged

the role of the "resistance" in countering Israeli aggression in a January 12 statement, and suggested that the army would join forces with Hizballah to counter any attack. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, commenting on the rocket attack, affirmed that the "resistance" arms are of a defensive nature to confront any possible Israeli assault. At a November conference on Lebanon's defense strategy sponsored by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA), Michel Nawfal, foreign editor of Saad Hariri's Future newspaper, proposed a "critical red line" with Israel, which if crossed, would authorize the use of Hizballah's arms against Israel.

¶14. (C) Fortunately for Lebanon, Israel did not cross this "red line." Although both Hizballah and the IDF heightened their state of alert during the conflict, carefully watching the other's moves, they also were diligent in keeping the lines of communication open. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams told us January 9 that Hizballah officials had been in direct communication with the IDF on assuaging concerns about "not innocent actions" along the border. While Hizballah intentionally maintained an ambiguous position on its involvement in the January 8 and January 14 rocket attacks, Israeli press asserted that Hizballah was not suspected, Williams noted. Moreover, Israeli retaliation to the attacks was proportionate and, on both occasions, the incidents were contained.

USEFUL AMBIGUITY

¶15. (C) Hizballah's ambiguity regarding whether or not it would respond militarily to the events in Gaza and what was its role in the rocket attacks indicate that it has an intentional strategy to keep the Israelis guessing and maintain its own mystique at home. By refraining from opening a second front yet at the same time threatening to retaliate if provoked, Hizballah succeeded in pursuing a cost-free strategy in support of the Palestinians in Gaza

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while reinforcing the need for its own "resistance" as the major deterrent for Israeli aggression against Lebanon. Many contacts expressed the view that while Hizballah did not launch the January rocket attacks against Israel, such actions could not have occurred without Hizballah's consent. Thus Hizballah publicly absolved itself of any culpability for the January 8 and 14 rocket attacks without dispelling the widely held belief that it retains a strong hold over south Lebanon.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) The questions about what Hizballah would do raised during the Gaza crisis underscores the importance for Lebanon of resolving the issue of Hizballah's arms and developing a defense strategy in accordance with UNSCR 1701. At the same time, it illustrates the difficulty faced by the GOL moderates to push for disarmament when there is a broad national consensus supporting the use of Hizballah's arms to "resist" Israeli aggression. Moussawi's January 25 statement that Hizballah is working on gradually absorbing the political forces within the framework of the "resistance" -- and not the other way around -- is a chilling indication of how it views the future.

¶17. (C) Gaza was a victory for the "resistance" without Hizballah ever having to fire a shot; but it was also a victory for UNSCR 1701, which received the support of the entire GOL, including, implicitly, Hizballah. Absent an outright Israeli attack or orders from Iran, we believe Hizballah currently does not have an interest in provoking a second war with Israel at this time. End comment.

SISON